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City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy

# Recommendations

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## Improving the Quality of Hartford's WIC Program

**APRIL 2002**

*Prepared by the City of Hartford  
Advisory Commission on Food Policy*

# Acknowledgements

The City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy wishes to acknowledge the following:

- The City Manager of Hartford for sanctioning this effort to improve the quality of WIC services.
- The WIC mothers who participated in the Focus Groups and provided their honest answers in order to improve services for all.
- Family Life Education and Healthy Families Connecticut for assisting in recruiting and hosting the focus groups.
- Shaw's Supermarkets and Stop & Shop Supermarkets for donating \$25 gift certificates to focus group participants.
- United Way and Infoline for donation of resource materials for focus group participants.
- Thanks to Patti Paddock, MPH, CHES, California WIC Branch for sharing focus group protocols.
- WIC Management staff for their contributions, willingness to acknowledge problems and challenges, and readiness to actively participate in finding solutions.
- Members of the Hartford WIC Advisory Committee for their work in completing this project.

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# Recommendations

## *Improving Hartford's WIC Program*

### **Executive Summary**

Repeated problems with quality of service provided by Hartford's WIC program (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) have been reported consistently during the past several years. Concerns over these problems prompted the City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy to work with the City to establish the Hartford WIC Advisory Committee (HWAC). Meeting over the past six months, the HWAC was charged with developing benchmarks and recommendations to improve the quality of service for Hartford WIC.

### **Summary of Findings**

- Staffing challenges include lack of accountability, union interaction, turnover, and lack of professionalism between staff and between staff and clients.
- Access challenges include a) a cumbersome telephone system that often goes unanswered, phone messages that are not promptly returned, use of the phone for extended medical card verification; b) hours of service are inconvenient for many mothers who have returned to work or school; c) WIC staff are reported by management to be reluctant to flex their hours; and d) satellite sites and additional full service locations are under development.
- Services to Clients are limited by understaffing that decreases the amount of time available for nutrition education, and limited opportunities for providing referrals to other complementary services.
- Client Satisfaction varies greatly between the results of the WIC administered surveys and the focus group responses in March and April 2002.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

- ❑ City officials under the direction of the City Manager should undertake an internal evaluation of Hartford WIC program, including staff input which was not possible through the HWAC.
- ❑ The HWAC Benchmarks should be adopted in full with specific plans for implementation including timeline.
- ❑ Client satisfaction should be assessed by a mechanism external to WIC staff.

## ***Proposed Benchmarks***

### *Desired Outcomes:*

WIC Clients feel respected and welcomed at WIC clinics, positive about the services they receive, and look forward to their WIC visits.

WIC Staff feel respected and valued, are committed to meeting the clients' needs, and feel appreciated for their work.

### Proposed Benchmarks

Clients spend no more than one hour at the WIC clinic for an initial or re-certification visit, on average.

Clients spend no more than 10 to 20 minutes at the WIC clinic for Check Pick-Up, on average.

Client phone calls are answered within 5 rings by a person, during business hours.

Client phone messages are returned within two business days.

Clients spend at least 15 minutes with a nutritionist at least twice per year.

Clients are able to schedule an appointment within 2 weeks of calling.

The Hartford WIC service area has at least 3 full service clinic sites and six satellite sites.

Extended hours are available at all WIC sites at least twice a month.

WIC Offices have positive, welcoming atmosphere with designated children's areas that provide nutrition education and toys.

Staff members are qualified, trained and willing to perform all duties as appropriate.

The Hartford WIC program meets demand for services, meeting these benchmarks.

WIC Management has the expertise to hold staff accountable for job performance and is comfortable developing and implementing professional growth and development plans for all staff.

City Union Representatives and WIC Management have a positive working relationship with the shared goal of optimum client service and staff satisfaction.



# Recommendations

## *Improving Hartford's WIC Program*

### **The WIC Program**

WIC, the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, is a food and nutrition education program for low income, pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, and infants and children under the age of five. Participants must be at nutritional risk and have incomes less than 185% of the federal poverty level. Unique among federal programs, WIC provides specific nutritious food packages, in the form of WIC checks redeemable at grocery stores, as an adjunct to ongoing health care.

In Connecticut, WIC is administered by the State Department of Public Health. The Department allocates federal WIC funds to individually operated programs across the state. For the first time in over 25 years, the State implemented a grant program in 2001, requiring all existing and interested agencies to submit grant proposals for local program operation. The city of Hartford's Department of Health has operated the WIC program in Hartford and several surrounding communities for over 20 years.

Under the new process, Hartford WIC received a provisional one-year grant award for the 2002 fiscal year. Concerns regarding limited satellite sites, staffing, and lack of extended hours were cited as reasons for limiting the contract to one year. The Hartford WIC Advisory Committee (HWAC) was formed at the request of the City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy in an effort to improve the quality of Hartford's WIC program.

### **City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy**

The City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy monitors nutrition and food assistance programs operated by the city. The Commission has followed the declining enrollment of the Hartford WIC program during the past nine years with concern. Delays in the opening of the Park Street office following a fire as well as challenges meeting client needs for extended hours, satellite locations and other services has been observed by the Commission. When possible, the Commission has worked with Hartford WIC management to resolve issues of concern.

Created in 1991, the City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy exists to integrate all agencies of the city in a common effort to improve the availability of safe and nutritious food at reasonable prices for all residents, particularly those in need. Commission members include representatives from food security organizations, city agencies and the public at large.

### **The Hartford WIC Advisory Committee**

The Commission requested – through an agreement with the Department of Health Director to work collaboratively on improving WIC – that the City Manager create the Hartford WIC Advisory Committee due to concerns regarding staffing vacancies, low enrollments, and decreasing quality of service.

#### **Purpose**

To create a city-sanctioned advisory committee to assist the WIC program in developing improvements in the quality of services to participants. Responsibilities include:

- Commit to complete work within six months
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the Hartford WIC program regarding:
  - Access (hours, location)
  - Staffing
  - Quality of Service
- Provide a report to the City Manager, Mayor, Council that includes recommendations to the Department of Health and WIC Director for program modifications and need for future input, such as focus groups, etc.

#### **Membership**

The WIC Advisory Committee is a temporary, ad hoc committee sanctioned by the City Manager of Hartford in cooperation with the City of Hartford's Advisory Commission on Food Policy. Staff support to HWAC is provided by Debra Lippoldt, Hartford Food System.

HWAC Members include: *HFPC Commissioners*: Joan Dauber (St. Francis Nutrition), Anir Gonzalez (Hispanic Health Center), Butch Hollister (ConnFarm). *Non-Commission Members*: Steve Balcanoff (Connecticut Children's Medical Center), Marilyn Claudio (Family Life Education), Dr. Ed Johnson (St. Francis), Katherine McCormack (Hartford Health Department), Kathy Novak (Healthy Families), Dr. Bob Painter (City Council), Elsa Smith-Pleasant (Hartford WIC).

Client input was gathered through two focus groups.

## **Process**

The HWAC met a total of five times from November through April, 2002. Hartford Food System staff researched other WIC Advisory Groups across the country. The State office was asked for assistance but little information was provided. Sample strategic plans and results of WIC client interviews and focus groups were gathered. The group reviewed background information prior to and during meetings to learn about the current WIC program needs, challenges and successes. The Committee met with Barbara Walsh, Director of the Connecticut WIC program to discuss state resources, expectations and trends. Two client focus groups were conducted. The Committee developed Benchmarks for Program Delivery with recommendations for the Commission to share with the City Manager, Mayor, City Council, Health Department and WIC.

## **Review of Hartford's WIC Program**

### **Staffing**

#### *Status*

Current Staffing for the Hartford WIC program includes:

| Program                    | Administrative/Management |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) Program Nutritionist   | (1) Program Manager       |
| (1) Nutritionist II        | (1) Junior Account Clerk  |
| (2) Nutritionist I         |                           |
| (4) Senior Nutrition Aides |                           |
| (1) Nutrition Aide         |                           |
| <u>(5) Interviewers</u>    |                           |
| 14 TOTAL program staff     |                           |

Vacancies: one nutritionist, one senior nutrition aide

Salaries (including benefits) comprise nearly 90% of the Hartford WIC budget (excluding Food Costs).

Current Caseload: 9,479

Staff are employees of the City of Hartford and are represented by one of the following unions: Local 1716, AFL-CIO, City of Hartford Professional Employees Association (CHPEA), or Hartford Municipal Employees Association (HMEA).

### *Challenges*

WIC management reports the following staffing challenges:

1. City hiring practices require hiring of Hartford minority prior to any other consideration.
2. Job Descriptions are not easily changed due to Union requirements.

3. Union representatives interrupt work flow by showing up without an appointment to report concerns with staffing.
4. High cost of "Help Wanted" Advertising (\$800) in Hartford Courant.
5. Staff not flexible re: hours, location, job duties.
6. Meeting above hiring requirements results in a minimum of four months hiring process.
7. Nutritionist positions in general do not pay as competitively as other comparable nutrition positions. Thus, many nutritionists gain WIC experience and move on. There is a high turnover rate.
8. Management reports that staff members are reluctant to travel to satellite locations or to staff extended site hours.
9. Staff members report abusive language by clients.
10. Staff members complain that the automobile provided by the City fleet for travel to satellite locations is unacceptable.

The Committee heard repeated concerns from management that job descriptions were difficult to revise, union interaction was difficult, and that staff were reluctant to pitch in wherever needed due to these limitations. Management reported many challenges holding staff accountable.

## **Access**

### *Status*

The Hartford WIC program currently serves the towns of Bloomfield, Hartford, West Hartford, and Windsor. (Prior to the current year, the Hartford program also included Newington, Rocky Hill and Simsbury). 2002 Program locations include:

1. Burgdorf/Fleet Center at 131 Coventry Street: 8:30 am to 4:30 pm, extended to 6 pm on Wednesdays. (Administrative Center, **Full Service**)
2. Santa Marquez WIC Center at 547 Park Street from 8 am to 4:30 pm. (**Full Service**)
3. Senior Nutrition Aide at Connecticut Children's Medical Center. (Satellite)
4. Community Health Services at 520 Albany Avenue three days per month. (Satellite)
5. West Hartford Town Hall at 50 South Main Street, WH, five hours (one day) per month. (Satellite)
6. Wilson Center in Windsor to open twice a month starting April 2002. (Satellite)
7. Salvation Army at Mandela Way under negotiation to open twice a month starting May 2002. (Satellite)

### *Challenges*

Appointments are made in advance by telephone. Management reports that the phone system is problematic. It is difficult to get staff to answer phones, depending on their job description. It is noted that frequently the phone rings

and goes unanswered or phone messages are not returned until up to a week later. The phone must be used to verify medical card numbers, thus tying up the phone lines. An electronic scanning machine for medical card verification is not in use at the WIC offices.

## **Services**

### *Status*

Each WIC program is required to provide the following services according to state and federal guidelines.

Determine Client Eligibility: **Categorical eligibility** (pregnant, postpartum up to 6 months, breastfeeding up to first birthday, infants from birth to 1<sup>st</sup> birthday, children up to age five) **Physical presence** at each certification, **Identity, Residency, Income, Nutritional Risk** all must be determined. Staff are sometimes have trouble implementing short-term enrollment if client doesn't have all the necessary paperwork. Generally, easement of requirements by the federal and state programs have made eligibility determination more efficient.

Assign Client Certification. Staff must assign participants into one of six nutritional risk priorities. Staff currently able to provide this service.

Provide Nutrition Education. Staff must provide at least two nutrition education contacts per client per year. Hartford WIC has an extensive collection of quality multi-media nutrition education materials.

Implement Food Delivery System. Checks are issued up to a maximum of three months.

Provide Referrals. Staff members are supposed to identify other community programs and services as appropriate to each client's situation.

### *Challenges*

Staff members do not always have the time to provide the quality nutrition education they would like, especially since the nutritionists' time is in such demand.

WIC Management reports that few referrals are being made by staff members.

## WIC Client Input

### Customer Satisfaction Surveys

#### *Status*

Every year, the local WIC programs conduct Participant Satisfaction Surveys. The survey is provided by the state WIC program. Clients are randomly asked to complete surveys during the year. The surveys are self-administered and are turned into staff members who forward them to program nutritionist or manager. The following table summarizes the results provided by the Hartford WIC program, 2000-2001 Annual Evaluation.

|  | Very Good | Good      | Fair     | Poor      | No Answer |
|--|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| How was your visit overall?  | 77%       | 20%       |          |           | 3%        |
| How did the staff treat you?   | 87%       | 10%       |          |           | 3%        |
|  | < 10 min  | 10-15 min | >15 min  | No Answer |           |
| How long did you wait to be seen today?                                      | 56%       | 30%       | 7%       | 7%        |           |
|  | 1-3 days  | 4-7 days  | > 1 week | Other     | No Answer |
| If you called to reschedule your appointment, how long did you have to wait? | 20%       | 10%       | 13%      | 23%       | 34%       |

**Has the nutrition information that you received at WIC helped you make healthier food choices?** 97% YES 0 NO

**Would you refer others to WIC?** 97% YES 3% NO

**If you could make one suggestion to the WIC program, what would it be?** “None. It’s a good program and they do a very good job.” All the responders stated that the Program was very helpful. The food items provided were of great help and the Nutrition Education helped them take better care of their families.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups were held on Monday, March 18 from 5:30 pm to 7 pm and on Wednesday, April 10, from 11 am to 12:30 pm. The first group was recruited by case workers at Family Life Education. The second group was recruited by case workers at Healthy Families CT. Nine participants participated in the focus groups and received a \$25 gift certificate from Shaw's Supermarket or Stop & Shop in addition to coupons and Infoline referral materials. These groups were facilitated by Debra Lippoldt, Hartford Food System, using a WIC focus group protocol adapted from those developed by California and Virginia WIC programs. (See appendix for focus group notes.)

As part of the "Project Renew", a federally-funded Nutrition Education Curriculum project being conducted by the State WIC program, two focus groups were held during February-March of 2002 in Hartford- one included primarily African American WIC participants, the other was primarily Latino participants. The Committee hoped to utilize the results of the state-sponsored focus groups to compare responses and supplement the results. Unfortunately, requests to the State WIC office for a copy of the questions asked during the focus groups as well as any preliminary results yielded no information. After more than a month following the request, State WIC Director has not provided the information.

### **Results of Focus Groups**

The two groups included women who were relatively new to the WIC program (an average of 4 months) and those enrolled for more than four years on average. The most positive aspects of the Hartford WIC program as reported by the participants included:

- Farmers' Market Nutrition Program Coupons
- Formula (both receiving it and learning proper ways to prepare it)
- Milk and Egg benefits

All participants reported the following concerns about the Hartford WIC Program:

- Long waits (to be seen at appointment time, for return phone calls, to answer phone)
- Disrespectful staff
- Lack of Children's Area for Education and Play

## **Commission Analysis**

### **Staffing**

- Current staffing is not meeting the needs of the clients.

The ability to provide satellite locations, extended hours, efficient scheduling and quality customer service all depend on adequate staffing patterns. In addition, staff must be trained in cultural diversity, customer service, managerial skills as well as nutrition. It was beyond the scope of this short-term evaluation to assess the staffing patterns, job descriptions, level of expertise, management, and staff performance.

As a result, the Commission is not in a position to endorse or reject the WIC management proposal for reorganization and reclassification of staff positions. The Commission commends the Hartford WIC program for considering options and recognizing the need for changes.

The current staffing pattern may be responsible for fragmentation and inefficiency, with middle-level staff adding a second or third stop for the client at each visit rather than providing a “one-stop” appointment, where all or most all tasks can be accomplished by one staff member meeting with the client. It is also possible that in the absence of accountability and consequences for inability to perform job duties, staff are being allowed to continue inefficient and counterproductive practices that do not serve the program well. Further review of staffing and union issues is needed.

### **Access**

- Recently added locations have improved access.
- Sites need to incorporate extended hours to increase client access.

The Hartford WIC Program has demonstrated progress in increasing the number of satellite locations available to clients. The Commission considers the current plan of expansion as reasonable and in the best interests of clients.

It is critical to increase options for extended hours, possible weekend hours and other avenues to accommodate the WIC population. The demands of school enrollment and employment makes meeting conventional business hours ever more difficult. The Hartford WIC program must expand extended hours.

### **Services**

- Clients are not being well-served under the current system.

Staffing challenges have a negative impact on the services. It does not appear that the Hartford WIC program has major problems in implementing eligibility requirements and clients do not report difficulties meeting most

requirements. The Commission did not undertake an analysis of nutrition education and is not able to make any recommendations at this time.

Clients do not report significant challenges meeting program requirements but do find it challenging to make formula last, for example, throughout the month. Management reports the challenge of effectively teaching proper formula use. Also reported is the current practice of using powdered baby formula in illicit drug use as a factor in improper use of services.

Clients and management staff both report that few referrals to other programs and services are being made. As clients find themselves with more responsibilities (seeking employment, child care, school and more), access to other community support and services through referrals become important. WIC staff must develop stronger mechanisms for referrals.

The main issue remains lack of effective staffing to make sure services are provided efficiently and with quality.

#### **Client Satisfaction**

- Clients do not feel respected at Hartford WIC offices.

The disparity between the Client Satisfaction Survey results and the focus groups has several possible explanations. It is acknowledged that the focus groups included a very small number of WIC participants and any inference to the larger Hartford WIC population is problematic. In contrast, the results of the WIC-administered survey may reflect a bias of clients not wanting to be seen as complaining or fearing negative treatment based on survey responses.

Informal feedback from caseworkers and professionals who interact with the Hartford WIC program supports some of the concerns raised in the focus groups—particularly difficulty reaching WIC offices by phone, disrespectful treatment by some staff, and delays in returning phone calls.

WIC Management acknowledges some staff members are not tolerant of children in the waiting rooms. They also note that staff shortages and absences reduces the quality of services provided.

#### **Future WIC Administration**

The Commission is concerned that the State's proposal/bidding process for the WIC program could negatively impact Hartford WIC clients, as it is unclear how a transition from an existing program to a new administrator would be accomplished. For example, during the first year of the proposal process, the Hartford WIC program reported a two-week notice for a change in contract.

In the event that the state awards the Hartford WIC contract to another agency, particularly an agency that does not have an existing WIC program, a process for transition should be implemented rather than a discrete beginning and end based on fiscal year. Client needs must be taken into account.

## ***Proposed Benchmarks and Recommendations***

### *Desired Outcomes:*

WIC Clients feel respected and welcomed at WIC clinics, positive about the services they receive, and look forward to their WIC visits.

WIC Staff feel respected and valued, are committed to meeting the clients' needs, and feel appreciated for their work.

### Proposed Benchmarks

Clients spend no more than one hour at the WIC clinic for an initial or re-certification visit, on average.

Clients spend no more than 10 to 20 minutes at the WIC clinic for Check Pick-Up, on average.

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The Hartford WIC service area has at least 3 full service clinic sites and six satellite sites.

Extended hours are available at all WIC sites at least twice a month.

WIC Offices have positive, welcoming atmosphere with designated children's areas that provide nutrition education and toys.

Staff members are qualified, trained and willing to perform all duties as appropriate.

The Hartford WIC program meets demand for services, meeting these benchmarks.

WIC Management has the expertise to hold staff accountable for job performance and is comfortable developing and implementing professional growth and development plans for all staff.

City Union Representatives and WIC Management have a positive working relationship with the shared goal of optimum client service and staff satisfaction.

## **Actions to Reach Benchmarks**

- Implement change in staffing pattern to accomplish the benchmarks noted. Fragmented service through the current multi-layered staffing pattern imposes a complex layer of limitations on the flexibility of staff assignments and requires clients to see multiple staff, increasing the amount of time clients spend per visit.
- Receptionist Position staffed during all open hours. (Could be rotation of staff or specific receptionist. Explore job training programs, WIC client, other.)
- Utilize Electronic Scanning Machines at all sites to decrease phone time for verification of medical cards.
- Recruit Women's Clubs, Hospital Auxiliary or other Civic Groups to fund children resource areas at WIC offices.
- Create a "Client Navigator" volunteer to assist clients through the WIC system. (Request a case worker from local programs such as MIOP, Family Life Education, Healthy Families CT-Hartford, Community Health Services, Hispanic Health Council or others to participate in providing this service. Alternately, consider volunteer recruitment through a Hospital Auxiliary, Junior League or other Civic Group to assist in this process during the first 3 to 6 months of the new system.
- Require management training in employee evaluation, discipline and working with union requirements at least once a year.

## **Monitoring Benchmarks**

The Commission recommends that the City Council request a six-month review of progress toward meeting benchmarks. The Director of the Health Department could provide 3, 6 and 12 month progress reports to the Council's Committee on Health, Human Services and Recreation. Additionally, several recommendations should be implemented within three months:

- Client phone calls are answered, by a person, within 5 rings, during business hours.
- Electronic Scanning Machines are in operation.
- WIC management demonstrates staff performance monitoring that reflects accurate accountability.

# Appendix

Client Satisfaction Survey

Focus Group Notes